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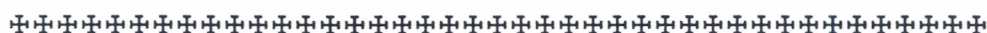
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Benefits of Studying the Old Testament



Warren Baldwin

As a Christian I have inherited a body of literature, the Bible, that is diverse in its authorship, its background, and its subject matter. Some of the material reads as if it were written yesterday in and for my world (e.g., a father's concern for his ill child, Mark 5:23), and some of it reads as if it were written at another time in another world for another people (e.g., Numbers 7)—which, in fact, it was.

So I wonder sometimes, What am I supposed to do with the Old Testament? The sacrifices, the rituals, and the religious leadership of the Old Testament do not conform to the way I worship and practice my faith today. They reflect the mentality and lifestyle of "another world." Furthermore, I have been taught that the Old Testament was written for Jews and the New Testament for Christians. Thus the main focus of my study must be on the New Testament. But the fact that the Old Testament is a part of my Bible makes it difficult for me to dismiss, even if it is far removed from the circumstances of my life. The Old Testament demands attention. It demands a reading.

For me, one compelling reason to read the Old Testament is the extensive use Jesus made of it in his

ministry. When Jesus stood in the synagogue at Nazareth and read, "The Spirit of God is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . ." (Luke 4:18–19), he was reading from the Old Testament (Isa 61:1–2). Is it not rather striking that Jesus used the Old Testament to both announce and validate his ministry? Instead of beginning his public ministry with a declaration of something new, a breakaway from the old and outdated, Jesus rooted his ministry in the old. He looked back at a history of God's dealing lovingly and patiently with his people. He rooted himself in a long tradition of salvation history. He declared himself to be the fulfillment of what God had been working toward for a long time (Luke 4:21). And the story of that work of God is preserved for us in the Old Testament. Maybe the Old Testament was written at another time in another world for another people. But as I become the recipient of Jesus' ministry to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed, I move closer to that other world. I become a part of that ages-old salvation history, and it becomes my history as well.

Another striking passage is found in Mark 12, in which Jesus was challenged by a teacher of the law who had heard Jesus debating with the Sadducees. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

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(Mark 12:28). Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4–5). And the next part of his answer is from Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Now, we would expect Jesus' answer to come from the Old Testament, because the question concerned the law and the commandments. What we might not expect from Jesus' answer is the premium that he placed upon these two commands—"There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31)—nor that he would use these two commandments to judge the character and quality of a person's

heart. The questioner's spiritual state was assessed by Jesus to be "not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34), and two Old Testament passages serve as the criteria to make that judgment.

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Jesus didn't need something fresh and innovative to let his inquirer know his proximity to the kingdom. He relied on something old. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the embodiment of God's love. He is the sacrifice by which I may have eternal life. And he read the Old Testament. That is a compelling reason for me to read it.

Secondly, Jesus is not the only one who made extensive use of the Old Testament. The apostles and the early church did so as well. Peter's sermon at Pentecost and Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin were derived straight from the Bible—the Old Testament. When the noble Bereans searched the Scriptures every day, they were studying the very texts from which Paul was preaching—the Old Testament. The Scriptures used to school Timothy in faith, wisdom, salvation, and everything needed to be thoroughly equipped to do every good work were those of the Old Testament. The spiritual health and vitality of the early church was sustained by the old Scriptures. They can certainly serve us in the same way today.

A third reason we ought to give more attention to the Old Testament is that we need to allow God to speak to us through the pages of the entire Bible. That may be overstating the obvious, but think about it. For those of us who are preachers, we often go to the text for a sermon. We may already have an idea in mind for which we are seeking a text, or we may be sifting for some preachable nugget. In either event we read with a narrow focus, and we risk forcing the Word to conform to an agenda we need it to serve. In so doing, we may allow the more profound truths or themes of Scripture to go unnoticed. That is especially true if we are looking for material that conforms to propositional preaching, with commands, examples, and inferences—an approach that may exclude the Old Testament entirely.

What about the great texts of the Old Testament that proclaim the abounding love, compassion, and grace of God toward a stubborn people? What about the great texts that show a penitent people entreating God to hear their cry for mercy? What about the great texts that reveal the tension and even doubt of a person trying to understand God and make sense of difficult circumstances? Many of these texts do not accommodate a propositional style of preaching; thus, they get neglected. And that is a shame. We need to develop the ability, first for ourselves and then for the benefit of those who hear our sermons, to allow the Bible to speak on its own terms and then to feel the impact of that message. It may be that some of our sermons need to be spiced more frequently with a sense of awe, love, and appreciation at God's greatness and

glory and less frequently with appeals to action.

So far I have provided reasons for studying the Old Testament. The reasons are quite simple: Jesus read and preached from the Old Testament, the apostles and the early church were students of it, and reading the Old Testament is the only way we can allow the entire Word of God to speak to us. What benefits are there for those of us who will read it today? Elizabeth Achtemeier answers that question in *Preaching from the Old Testament*. Commenting on the value of reading the Old Testament, she writes, "[The Old Testament] is the sacred history of God's words and acts that bear with them the gift and power of new life. And our people never know the truth and never become new creatures until they enter into that sacred story." She later adds that "an ignorance of the Old Testament has serious consequences. If we in the church do not know the Old Testament and do not preach from it to our people, we leave them with no means for properly understanding and appropriating the Christian faith."¹

Similarly, Donald Gowan writes, "[The Old Testament] is . . . a part of the broader, canonical tradition preserved for us by the believing community and so a valuable witness to what it means to believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."² In short, the Old Testament constitutes an invaluable part of the information we have about our God, salvation, and godly living.

In closing, I offer to those of us who preach and teach the Word of God, both Old and New Testaments, the following challenges:

1. That we resist the tendency of many Christians to use the Old Testament merely for an occasional illustration for a “New Testament” sermon or as a proof text for a point we are making. The Old Testament deserves a more honest and dignified treatment than that.

2. That we recognize the value of the Old Testament in its own right. It is the Word of God. It was the text for the preaching of Jesus and the apostles. And it still can be and should be the text for much of our preaching today.

3. That we look for and develop the great themes and subjects of the Old Testament. Creation, family, sin, call, promise, obedience, community, restoration, and numerous other theologically important themes can

only be meaningfully appropriated in our understanding and faith if we allow the Old Testament message to be read in our study and heard in our pulpits.

4. Finally, that we allow the Old Testament to reveal the nature of the God we serve. He is the creator. He loves, calls, forgives, repents, punishes, yearns, pleads, gets angry, and forgives again. As we trace the history of God’s dealing with his people (our spiritual ancestors) through the Old Testament, we gain insights about our God. “The Old Testament, in short, provides the basic framework for viewing all of life as lived under God. The New Testament largely assumes that framework and builds upon it.”³ It is upon the Old Testament that we are dependent for a large portion of our

insight about God and his nature.

“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). What was “the Word” Timothy had available to him to fulfill this admonition from Paul? The Old Testament. Read it.

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Notes

¹Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 15, 21.

²Donald Gowan, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 4.

³C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (Abilene: ACU, 1990), 57.

(“Forgiving Ourselves” continued from pg. 38)

on humility. *We struggle* with ego and control because we are acutely aware that there is no room for pride before our Maker. But unfortunately, as many have hammered the message of humility, trying to make sure that the overly proud understand, some listeners have retained only words of condemnation. Their Christian lives are bound up, about as successful as if John Newton had tried to write “Amazing Grace” without joy.

It is difficult to reach family and friends whose faith is haunted by their fears, but it is imperative that we try. I used to think it was only the gentle among us—those wounded souls for whom God’s grace should

be the warm blanket of their sad existence—who experienced such trepidation, but increasingly I’ve found fear all around: the faithful sojourner fearing death because she may not have “earned” her way, another trembling with a secret for which he believes he’s condemned. An old German proverb says, “If God were not willing to forgive, heaven would be empty.” Paul lived that truth, not because he thought he deserved it, but because he recognized grace for what it is—a glorious life raft. Paul’s faith was a celebration. But Paul, unlike many of us, had learned to take God at his word.

C. S. Lewis once said, “If God forgives us, we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting ourselves up as a higher tribunal than him.” God has provided the means. He has laid out the terms. No strings. Unconditional. Believe on him, and in that rebirth, the record is purged. Maybe it’s time to read the gospel again, to shut down our internal critics. God doesn’t ask that we deserve it, which is a good thing, since we never could.

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